THE UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Reviewing Structures & Processes for Councillors

Occasional Paper 5

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PART I:
PRESENT STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES -
THERE IS A CHOICE

INTRODUCTION

Much has changed in local authorities over recent years, yet in many authorities there has been less change in the political structure and processes built into the workings of local authorities. This has not been for the want of urging. Councillors have been urged to concentrate on strategy formation and on performance review, but the reality and immediacy of many councillors' concerns makes them reluctant to accept those urgings. Councils have been urged to experiment with new political structures based on the directly elected mayor, but there has been little positive response to proposals which appear to leave little role for the general body of councillors.

The mistake has not been to urge change, but the way it has been done. In considering change there is a need to work with the grain of how councillors work. There is no point in devising processes that assume that councillors will not be concerned with casework and will not seek to use their understanding of casework in evaluating policy or in monitoring performance. Indeed it is difficult to see how one evaluates policy or monitors performance without understanding what it means in particular cases. In the end working with the grain may get one further than working against the grain. Showing that there are possibilities that better fit the way councillors seek to perform their roles is more likely to gain support than abandoning existing structures and processes for an uncertain outcome.

For it should not be assumed that councillors are satisfied with existing structures and processes. There are plenty of complaints about the nature of the council meeting itself, through the workings of committees and sub-committees to the services they receive in support of the various roles they play as councillors. One does not often hear councillors looking forward to council meetings or to committee meetings as rewarding experiences. Yet it often seems to councillors that they have to be accepted in their present form as an essential part of local government.

There is a difficulty in thinking outside the system one knows. The traditional workings of local authorities through committees and sub-committees and the way they conduct their business come to be seen as **the** way and the only way in which a council can work. It is almost as if a local authority is seen as being the committee system. Certainly it is the committee system that tends to define the role of the councillor and his or her working pattern. It is not surprising that local government and the traditional committee system seem irrevocably linked to many in local government. It almost seems to many councillors that they have no choice about the processes and structure which they have inherited. Around present practice a mind-set is formed which appears to rule out alternatives.

Yet there is a choice and a real choice to be made on the structure and processes to support the councillor's role. It is an area in which local government has very great freedom. Thus one district council in Scotland - Clackmannanshire - created a council without committees with all business conducted in the council meetings and a similar approach is being adopted in the new unitary authority. Admittedly this is and was a council with only twelve councillors. It shows however the potential for choice. While some may seek and achieve radical change showing the full scope for choice, that is not the only possible road to change. The scope for choice can be used and is being used for change from within. In many ways some local authorities are showing the scope for choice, changing the nature of council meetings, finding new forms of committee meeting and developing new settings and processes not challenging directly the committee system but changing it from within or adding to it. Such a process of change works with the grain.

THE CASE FOR REVIEW

The argument of this paper is that councillors do not have to accept the structures and processes they have inherited. Rather there is a choice. Structures and processes should be regarded as instruments to enable the councillor to do their work. The issue must be whether they are the best instruments for that purpose. There is a case for each council reviewing its structure and processes, to see whether they adequately support the councillors' roles.

The need for review derives from two related but different sources. The first is that councillors are not necessarily satisfied with existing structures and processes. They may have come to accept them as a fact of life, yet such structures and processes give only limited support to the differing roles of the councillors. The second is that a changing society and changing legislation have led to changes in the role of and method of working in local authorities, which inevitably have an impact on the councillor's roles and the way those roles are performed. Such changes suggest the need for reconsideration of existing structures and processes.

There are three elements to be taken account of in a review of the political structure and processes:

- the existing structures and processes and their strengths and weaknesses in relation to the roles of councillor. This highlights the committee structure because of its dominance, but also the lack of support for other roles
- the implications of changes that have had their impact both on the role of local authorities and their way of working
- the role sought and the method of working implied.

Appraising Present Structures and Processes

Councillors play many roles. They are elected representatives with a concern for the area they represent and a responsibility for their individual constituents within it. They are political persons elected to represent a distinctive set of views which are normally those of a particular party, but may in the case of an independent be moulded more by the politics of geography. The representative and the political roles cannot be confined within particular structures or limited to particular processes. Those roles are the distinctive contribution the councillor brings to local government and to all their work within it.

Councillors play many other roles in relation to the authority. They are:

- members of the council attending council meetings, in which they may be a leader of the council a leader of the opposition

- members of committees, on which they may be chair or vice-chair

- members of a political group which, although not part of the formal workings of the authority, is yet recognised within it

- representatives of the authority appointed as such to outside bodies

- spokespersons for the authority making statements on behalf of the authority, particularly if they are leaders or chairs of committees

- advocates for the area represented, for particular viewpoints or for constituents and some may suggest other roles - it is for each council and each councillor to consider.

The way these roles are played will vary with the position held. Leader of the council, leader of the opposition (or, in a hung situation, leaders of all parties) and chairs all have their own roles. Backbenchers and opposition members have their own roles. The roles can be played in different ways. A councillor can be:

- Community leader
- Policy-maker for the authority or its services
- Organisational guide
- Scrutineer of on-going business
- Performance monitor
- Committee person dealing with the agenda
- Constituency spokesperson
- Consumer advocate
- Case-worker
- An opposition debater.

The diversity of roles and of interpretations given to the role can be seen as a weakness if there is a view that the councillor should have a particular defined place in the organisation. The diversity of roles and of interpretations given to the role can, however, be seen as a strength. It enables different councillors to play different roles and in different ways, and for the roles to change over time.

For the moment it is sufficient to note three points:

- There is a diversity of organisational roles that can be, and are, played by the councillor.

- Those roles can be, and are, interpreted in different ways.

- To all these roles, whatever the interpretation, the councillor brings roles as elected representative and as political person.

In the traditional working of the authority, however, while other roles may be recognised, the emphasis is placed on one role - the role of the councillor as chair or member of the committee. The nature of that role is elaborated in the agendas which define the business of the committee. The dominance of committee working is reflected in the tendency of councillors to identify with the committees on which they serve. If one asks a councillor what is their role in the authority, they are likely to reply with "I am on the housing and planning committees" or "I am the chair of social services" and only rarely will they say "I represent Mid-Downs Ward" or its equivalent.

The time-table of committee and council meetings build their cycle into the work of the councillor and indeed of the political groups. They represent the fixed points in the diary. The agenda determines the working of committees, defining the issues for attention.

The traditional workings of local authorities gives but little recognition to other roles, except for the council meeting itself. And the council meeting itself will tend to focus attention on decisions or reports from committees. Councils do, of course, give a role to councillors as representatives on outside bodies, but in many authorities that role has little support or recognition. They are not advised on the policy to be pursued or required to report back. It is as if they are not treated as representatives of the authority, once the appointment has been made. In this neglect the dominance of the committee system can be seen. It is as if the council is saying that is the only role that matters. **The issue posed is therefore whether the existing structure and processes of local authorities give adequate support to other councillor roles than that of committee member.**

The committee system defines implicitly, if not explicitly, the role of the councillor, and provides the main official setting for his or her work. The processes of the committee are the processes of decision-making for the council and the information given to the councillor is largely determined by the information given to committees. If by support for the councillor's role one means settings, processes and information, then support for the councillor is focused on the committee role. Any appraisal of existing support for the councillor's role must start with and from an appraisal of the role of the committee.

Such an appraisal of the traditional committee system must identify weaknesses, but also strengths, for there are strengths as well as weaknesses. In any changes that are introduced the aim must be to overcome those weaknesses but maintain those strengths.

The main **weaknesses** often identified are:

"The committee system focuses the councillor's attention on a narrow area of concern." The councillor is elected to the council and as such is concerned with all its workings, but committee work occupies most of his or her time. Committees focus on particular services and there is a danger that the councillor becomes an advocate for the service rather than for the community.

"The committee system neglects the concerns of councillors for their ward." Because the committee system normally focuses on services and a councillor is likely to be on only two or three committees, there is no opportunity to raise many matters of concern to the ward. There is no opportunity to have an adequate discussion of issues of ward concern that cross committees.

"Many issues of community concern do not fit easily into the committee structure." Committees focus on services, but increasingly issues such as the environment or community safety cannot be fitted into that structure. These are "the wicked issues", so-called because they do not fit past ways of working. Such issues not merely cross services but involve the council in aspects of community life that are not covered by any of the services.

"Committee agendas focus councillors' attention on the day-to-day workings of the service." Committee working is often based on the principle of control as it happens, rather than on the principle of control by setting direction, delegating management responsibility and reviewing performance. Agendas fill up with the current business of departments giving councillors the illusion of control rather than its reality.

"Committee agendas meet the needs of the organisation rather than the needs of councillors." Too rarely do committees review the nature of their agendas, which follow pre-determined patterns. Agenda reviews enable councillors to determine whether they were considering the right issues in the right way.

"Strategy is not focused on by committees, it is just another item on the agenda." If a committee considers the strategy for the services for which it is responsible, it may be considered as just one item on a long agenda, allowing only a perfunctory discussion. Strategy can only be adequately discussed at a special meeting or meetings devoted to it.

"The formality of committee working prevents discussion of policy." As an authoritative forum for decisions, a committee has to have formal rules of business. That however is not the best setting for the flow of discussion that encourages policy development.

"The Policy Committee is all very well as a title, but we never discuss policy." It is too easy for the Policy Committee to be overwhelmed by resource issues or business referred by other committees. Time to develop corporate policy or to consider the overall needs of the community can be squeezed out by the demands of on-going business.

"We spend too much time in committees." It can be argued that there are too many committees, meeting too often, with too many items on the agenda.

"The committee system hides the reality of political power." Where an authority is subject to majority control, most decisions will reflect that majority. Yet there is no committee which reflects that reality, because of the statutory rules about proportionality. Such an arrangement confuses rather than ensures clear accountability.

Against the weaknesses can be arrayed a series of **strengths**. Indeed, looked at another way some of the weaknesses are strengths.

The strengths of the committee system that are often put forward include:

"Involves all councillors in the work of the council." The committee system gives each councillor a role in making decisions on an aspect of the council's work, giving them knowledge and information about that work. Contrast the position in local government with the position in Parliament where most MPs are not involved in the day-to-day working of government.

"Enables councillors to specialise in areas of interest." Councillors will normally serve on two or three committees, which are likely to represent their main interests. Their attention is focused upon those committees in which they develop specialist understanding.

"The composition of committees give councillors from all parties their fair share of places." The rules governing proportionality ensure that the share of places on committee for each party group is based on their number of councillors in relation to the size of the council.

"The agendas of committees keep councillors informed and involved." Although the frequency of meetings and the detail of agendas can be criticised, it can be argued that councillors are kept informed in this way and can gain control over the work of the council.

"The focus of committees on services reflects the proper role of the council." If a major role of the council is to provide services - whether directly or indirectly - it is right that the committee system reflects that reality.

"The formality of committee business is its strength." Good chairmanship and proper rules of procedure ensure that business gets done and decisions are made. That is the test of effective committee working.

These strengths and weaknesses are not meant as a final list and are certainly not an authoritative list. **The issue for each council to consider is what are the strengths it wishes to maintain in the committee system and what are the weaknesses it wishes to overcome - in other words why it is reviewing the structure and what it hopes to achieve.** The strengths and weaknesses suggested are pointers to start discussion, not to close it.

Change in Local Government - Implications for Councillors

Changes have taken place in society and in government legislation which have affected the role of local authorities and their ways of working, leading to changes in management structures and processes. They have implications too for political structure and processes which have not been fully appreciated in some authorities, although they have led to significant changes in others.

Some of the changes are discussed below:

- CCT, and to a degree the development of devolved management, mean that councils and committee exercise control through the specifications or targets set and the review of performance, rather than controlling directly. This has implications for the working of committees and the nature of their agendas

- the separation of client and contractor coupled with the development of responsibility at cost centres gives a clear focus for management. It makes important, however, the need to maintain a corporate overview if fragmentation is to be avoided. The authority needs to consider how this corporate overview can be maintained by councillors

- the relations between the authority and the public are changing. There is an emphasis on the need to be close to the customer and close to the citizen. There is a need to consider how such developments affect the role of the councillor. Properly developed they should strengthen the role of the councillor as elected representative, but can be seen as threatening that role

- local communities face a series of "wicked" issues which cannot readily be contained within committee structures: community safety; the environmental issue and the need for sustainable development are examples. Local communities look to the local authority to provide a lead on such issues. Because they cross both committee and organisational boundaries they challenge existing structures and processes.

- An increasing number of organisations, both public and private, play a part in the on-going life of the local community. This can create a need for the local authority to provide community leadership. The issue raised is how such a role can be given expression in the structure of council and committee.

- Management approaches are changing. There is an emphasis on organisational values, on strategic management, on performance measures, and on human resource management. If the working of committees does not change to an equivalent extent, then the councillors may well become less effective and less satisfied with their role. Management change could leave the councillor behind.

The cumulative effect raises **issues as to the adequacy of the existing structures and processes in the light of these changes.**

The Role and Method of Working Sought

The response to these changes will vary according to the role and way of working sought by the authority. The Local Government Management Board's publication, *Fitness for Purpose*, posed a series of issues about the role and way of working. These were posed for the new local authorities under local government reorganisation, but they are as relevant to the issue of the political structure and processes in existing authorities.

1. The extent to which the local authority wishes to play a wider role in the government of the local community.

   A local authority can see its role as the provision of a series of services, whether that is done directly or through contracts made with other organisations. Such an authority sees itself as playing that defined and, to a degree, limited role in the government of the local community.

   A local authority can alternatively see itself as having a wide ranging concern for the problems and issues faced by the local community. While its power to take direct action is necessarily limited, it will seek, through influence or advocacy and in partnerships with other organisations, to play a wider role in the government of the local community.

2. The degree to which the authority wants to introduce market mechanisms such as competitive tendering in its operations.

Government legislation has had its impact on local authorities. The issue posed is whether the local authority seeks to limit the effect of such legislation to the services affected, or whether it seeks to extend the principles more widely by externalising services and introducing trading relationships in the internal workings of the authority.

3. The extent to which the authority recognises the importance of the different communities within its area.

Some local authorities are placing an emphasis upon the neighbourhoods within their area, building them into the structure of the authority through area committees or neighbourhood offices. Others have created forums for particular interests, such as an environmental forum or a youth forum.

Other authorities place their emphasis on the delivery of services to individuals on a uniform basis throughout the area.

Depending on the choices made on these issues and the emphasis put on them, different concepts develop of the role of the local authority and of the desired pattern of working. *Fitness for Purpose* sets out four cameos or illustrative examples that could emerge from the choices made:

1. **The authority with an emphasis on direct service provision**
   There is great strength in the traditional approach to local governance and service delivery. This approach can and should be revised to pay greater attention to the needs of customers. There is scope for the introduction of market mechanisms, but the scope should not be over-emphasised. The introduction of such mechanisms should not be used as a reason for the radical redesign of organisational structures, processes and personnel policies, which should remain rooted in an ethos of direct public provision.

2. **The authority with an emphasis on a commercial approach**
   Although there are some issues which require council action on behalf of the residents of the area as a whole, the main raison d'être of local government is to ensure the provision of an appropriate range of local services which cannot be provided directly by the market. Such services can in general be provided most cost-effectively by maximising the role of the private sector in the provision of service, and by stimulating a commercial approach within the authority itself.

3. **The authority with an emphasis on community governance**
   The main task of a local authority is to identify the needs of the area it represents and to do all it can to meet those needs. It should be prepared to use direct provision, and to work with a wide range of external organisations - public, private and voluntary - to meet those needs, depending on what is most effective in the circumstances. It should play a pro-active leadership role.

4. The authority with an emphasis on a neighbourhood approach
Many important local choices cannot be made on the basis of the summation of individual preferences, but require discussion and resolution at a collective level. Although some collective choices are authority-wide, council should recognise the significance and diversity of the different local communities within its area. Its structures, processes and personnel policies should reflect this emphasis on communities.

Most local authorities will probably not identify completely with any of these cameos. They will see themselves as combining elements of each of them, because the choices on the issues from which these cameos derive are not clear-cut. Most will choose an intermediate position.

To these issues others can be added. **The important point is for the local authority to base its political structure and processes on an understanding of the role sought for the local authority and the method of working to support the role.**

Towards a Design Brief

A review of the council's structure and processes should bring together the three elements discussed:

- an appraisal of existing structures and processes
- an understanding of the impact of change
- an appreciation of the role and method of working sought.

From these considerations the basis of a design brief can be established setting out:

- why the review is being undertaken
- what it is hoped to achieve
- issues on which it should focus
- problems to be overcome
- values to be maintained, strengthened or realised.

The danger is that a council proceeds to a review without consideration of the elements set out above or without the preparation of a brief to guide the review. The result may be structural change, but it can be structural change for its own sake. The aim should be change to support the roles of the councillors, which in turn should reflect the role sought for the authority in a changing environment. That may involve change in structures, but it may also involve change in processes and information. Time spent preparing for a review is time well spent if it is to be effective.

PART I:
FUTURE POSSIBILITIES -
THE CHOICES EXPLORED

The first part of the paper sets out the factors to be considered in drawing up the brief for the design of political structures and processes. This part deals with alternative elements that could contribute to the design - the materials that could be used.

It considers:

- replacing the committee system
- alternative committee structures
- new patterns of committee working
- reconsidering the role of the council
- additional settings and processes
- strengthening
- new roles for councillors
- support for the councillor.

REPLACING THE COMMITTEE SYSTEM

It has already been emphasised that the committee system is the dominant feature of the political structure and organisation of British local authorities. It is that system that forms the mind-set through which the possibility of change will be perceived or not perceived. The first issue is therefore whether the committee system should be replaced by an alternative structure.

That does not necessarily mean the replacement of committees as such. There will always be committees in any likely system of local government. There can be committees to review performance or to explore policy issues. What distinguishes the committee system in UK local authorities from the way, that local authorities are organised in some other countries, is the existence of committees responsible for the main decision-making for particular services or groups of services. The committees are in effect executive committees, exercising delegated powers from the council or making decisions subject only to ratification by the council.

The key distinguishing point which we have all come to accept as normal in this country is that the council has responsibility for all that happens in the authority. In practice, it can only exercise that responsibility through committees. So we have our traditional system of committees exercising executive powers.

In other countries the role of the council is distinguished form the role of the political executive, rather in the way that the role of Parliament is distinguished from that of the cabinet in our national politics. The council becomes then the equivalent of a "legislature" passing the budget and "enacting" major policy, with the political executive responsible for the running of the authority, taking over many of the functions exercised by committees in this country and formulating policy proposals and the budget for consideration by the council.

Proposals were put forward in the Department of the Environment's 1991 consultative paper on Internal Management for alternative forms of political executive:

- a cabinet appointed by the council
- a mayor, elected by the whole electorate of the authority
- a cabinet elected by the whole electorate of the authority.

The Consultation Paper proposed that local authorities should be allowed to put forward experiments along these lines.

Such proposals are normally justified as giving clear political leadership, clarifying accountability and streamlining decision-making. They did not prove generally attractive to local authorities. In part this was due to a failure to consider the role of the council and hence the role of the general body of councillors. Beyond a role on scrutiny committees reviewing aspects of council performance, there seemed no clear role for councillors. It led to the assumption that the political executive took over all the functions of the council. That is not necessarily the case. If the council is in effect the legislature making policy it will need new procedures to scrutinise such proposals in depth. Under some systems of political executive, the council meets as frequently or even more frequently than is normal in the UK.

A proposal to introduce a political executive should only be considered as part of a general review. Oslo provides one example:

In 1986 Oslo introduced a parliamentary model. A city cabinet was elected by the council with the right to control the administration. It took over in effect the functions previously carried out by the chief officers. It consisted of full-time members paid on a salary basis. However, at the same time the council introduced strengthened neighbourhood committees with responsibility for the day-to-day running of the certain services in the area. A centralisation of political control was coupled with a capacity for responsiveness to neighbourhood concerns.

The creation of a political executive did not mean the abolition of committees; new scrutiny committees were set up not only to appraise performance, but also to consider proposals put forward by the cabinet before they were submitted for approval by the

council. The changes in Oslo involved therefore not merely the creation of a cabinet, but also change in the working of the council and political decentralisation.

The Government set up a joint Working Party on the Internal Management of Local Authorities in England whose report, *Community Leadership and Representation: Unlocking the Potential* (1993) took a wider approach to the issue, suggesting other possibilities for the relationship between council and political executive.

The Commission for Local Democracy has revived the proposal for a directly elected mayor, or, in our terminology, leader, not as an experiment but as a general requirement on local authorities. The Labour Party in its policy document on local government (*Renewing Democracy, Rebuilding Communities*) has called for experiments in internal organisation, emphasising the possibility of a directly elected mayor.

Often this proposal is put forward without setting out its full implications. The role of the council is not spelt out with the result that it is difficult for councillors to envisage their role. To many it seems that the directly elected mayor will take over all their responsibilities. Nor are the political relationships explored and yet the nature of the relationship between the directly elected mayor and political groups on the council will determine how it will work in practice.

Consider these key questions:

Will political parties select candidates for mayor?

How will these candidates be selected?

Will the mayor be a member of the party group of councillors?

Will the mayor be bound by group discipline?

Will the mayor be entitled to require support from the party group on the council?

What will the powers of the mayor be and what will be the powers of the council?

Will the council use committees to appraise proposals put to it?

If the council is in effect the "legislature", approving the budget and major policy, will it have a legislative procedure, e.g. second reading, committee stage, report stage and third reading?

Will the mayor replace the chief executive as head of the paid administration?

Will the mayor be helped by assistant mayors, and if so how will they be appointed?

Will the mayor have responsibility for all executive decisions, whether taken directly or by delegated authority?

For what period of office will the mayor be elected, and will councillors be elected for the same period and at the same time?

How are conflicts between the mayor and the council to be handled, granted that the mayor may not be able to command a majority on the council?

Only when answers to these and other questions have been worked out can councils consider what the proposal means in practice. Depending on the answers, and they can vary, the directly-elected mayor proposal will have different implications. It is not enough to advocate the directly-elected mayor without being clear about what it means in practice.

The Commission for Local Democracy went some way to considering these questions:

"The principal tasks of the Leader/Mayor would thus be:

- to prepare and submit a budget to the Council;

- to propose an annual policy review to the Council;

- to respond to Council scrutiny of the executive;

- to produce an annual Democracy Plan including decentralisation to parishes, community councils or geographic areas;

- to employ and oversee the officers and Executive in implementing policies agreed with the Council;

- to exercise the functions of the local authority;

- to act as the representative head of the authority in all external events and lobbying."
(Commission for Local Democracy, 1995).

"Our proposal is for one in which the Leader/Mayor heads the administration of the Authority and appoints is senior officers, but is subordinate to the Council in so far as the latter has control over the budget and the broad policy plan. The Leader/Mayor must negotiate with the Council for resources and thus for general policy approval. This is sometimes called a "weak executive" model." (Ibid).

This goes further than most advocates of directly elected mayor. It does not however explore the relationship of the mayor to his or her own political party, nor does it explore how the council itself will operate.

There are arguments both for and against the directly elected mayors. There are benefits that come from the concentration of power but also dangers. The directly elected mayor is argued to command public attention but with the danger that personalising local politics may "stifle the lively political debates about basic issues of economic, social and environmental policy taking place at the local level rather than any real commitment to improve the quality of local self-government" - a danger highlighted in an analysis of

German experience by Udo Buhlman and Ed Page in *Local Leadership and Decision-Making: A Study of France, Germany, The United States and Britain*, published in 1994 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

The directly elected mayor challenges existing mind-sets. It poses for local authorities whether radical change is required. Radical change can however take other forms. The directly elected mayor is only one form of political executive. The mayor or leader as political executive could be appointed by the council normally avoiding the likelihood of conflict with the council. A cabinet system could be developed. **The first issue to be considered should not be whether or not to have a directly elected mayor but is whether or not to have a system based on a political executive instead of a system in which executive power is based on the council and exercised through committees. Only if such an alternative is sought does the issue of the form of political executive arise.**

Even although an authority rejects all such alternatives, there can be a value in consideration of the issue, since it requires the council to consider the nature and contribution of the traditional committee system.

Where radical change of this nature is eschewed, there remains the issue of whether the existing structure of councils give sufficient recognition to the role of political leadership. While membership of all formal committees of the council have to be proportionate to the strengths of parties on the council, many councils have made informal arrangements for meetings of chairs or for leader's meetings to be advised by officers. Such meetings cannot make decisions, but are seen in authorities as recognising the reality of political control and providing the basis for co-ordination and policy development.

In *Community Leadership and Representation* an authority is described with

> "... a Leader's Group consisting of the main committee chairs and the Leader. The Chief Executive also attends. This group acts as a single party executive. Its meetings are confidential and other members do not have access to its papers or reports of its deliberations."

Such groups are common, although they vary greatly in their role and composition. Their structure and processes may need review all the more because they exist outside the formal organisation of the authority. Equally important but different structures and processes are found in hung authorities where there are often regular meetings between the chief executive and leaders of all the political groups.

The issue is whether there is a need to review the arrangements for meetings between the political leadership and chief executive and chief officers.

ALTERNATIVE COMMITTEE STRUCTURES

The present committee structure is based on the main services of the authority, with most committees controlling a major department of the authority. **The issue raised is whether a radical change is required in the basis for the committee structure.**

Area Committees

Area committees of councillors have been set up in a number of authorities alongside the existing committee structure. Such committees normally consist of the elected councillors for the wards in each area, but have mainly a consultative role, possibly supplemented with limited responsibility for a range of local decisions. It is possible to go further and make such committees the main basis for the committee structure. Such was the structure in Tower Hamlets during the period of Liberal Democrat control. The main work of the council was conducted through seven area committees, each of which consisted of the councillors elected for the area, so that party control could vary from area to area and was not necessarily the same as party control over the authority. These committees controlled area organisations headed by neighbourhood chief executives.

The authority had a central strategy committee which included the chairs of the area committees. It retained other committees including the statutory social services committee and the then statutory education committee. The main weight of decision-making was however on the area committees, which were themselves advised by residents forums. The Tower Hamlets structure was abolished by the in-coming Labour administration, who originally retained a more limited area committee structure. They have now in effect reverted to a more traditional committee structure complemented by forms of community consultation.

South Somerset District Council has had an area committee structure for some time, whose role has been recently strengthened. There are four area committees and each area committee consists of the councillors for the area, so that the majority may not necessarily be the same as that of the authority.

The council decided in 1995 to make the area committees the main basis of the committee structure, each committee controlling an area organisation comprising the majority of the services provided by the authority. The only central committee retained is the District Committee made up of the chairs of each area committee, with three other members chosen by each area committee.

To change the basis of the committee structure to areas of the council is argued for as increasing the responsiveness of the authority to local problems and building on and enhancing the representative role of the councillor. It recognises that within the area of an authority are different communities, each of which has its own distinctive needs. This is the strength of the approach.

Such structures have not been widely adopted as the main basis of the committee structure. One of the reasons for this is a natural reluctance by a party or parties that have gained control of the council to give up control of particular area committees. It would, of course, be possible to compose the area committees so that they reflected the composition of the council, as has been done in Harlow.

Some see problems in a structure based on areas in dealing with issues that have an authority-wide significance or on which the council believes there should be an authority-wide policy. These matters can be dealt with by such central committees as are retained. However, if they exercise those responsibilities over a wide range of responsibilities it will mean that the area committees cannot be regarded as the main basis for the structure, but rather as complementary to a more traditional structure - an issue considered later in this paper. South Somerset has met these issues by creating four strategy groups which advise the District Committee and the area committees. They are based on:

Land Use, Economy and Transport
Social and Equality
Environment
Scrutiny.

They are supported by a series of specialist member panels. South Somerset consider this matrix arrangement much more productive than a series of competing functional committees. Area Committees in South Somerset recognise the co-ordinating role of the District Committee but they provide a major focus on area issues as well as being responsible for services provided in the area. Each Area Committee has taken some time out to consider 'the state of the area' and all have had informal meetings to consider single strategic issues and their own work programmes.

Client-based Structures

One suggestion considered in some of the new unitary authorities is to base committee structures on client groupings. In practice such structures mainly involve a change in the role of the Social Services Committee through the formation of a Children's Committee and a Committee for the Elderly, with the former also including responsibilities for education. There are legal problems with changes in the Social Services Committee, but the real difficulties and that many services do not fit easily into a client-based approach, since libraries, parks, roads and other services cater for many groups of clients. Inevitably one ends up with a modified structure such as that considered in one unitary authority, viz.

- a group of services for **children** based on social services (children's element) and education

- a group of services addressing the needs of **adults** which would include social services (adult services), housing, youth and community, leisure, arts, libraries and community development

- a set of services addressing the **economic** needs of our citizens based on economic regeneration and valuation

- a set of services based on the **physical** needs of our citizens, planning, transportation, highways, engineering and architects services

- a group of services based around the **protection** of our citizens, public health, environmental health, environmental issues, trading standards, welfare rights, police and fire service liaison.

In practice a client based structure is likely to provide only a partial basis for a committee structure.

Type of Task

An organisational review for local authorities in Norway, described in Harold Baldersheim and Per Stava (1996), considered alternative bases for committee structure. It put forward alternative models. One was based on services, one was based on geographical areas. It considered a client-based structure, but decided it was impractical. It did however propose a third structure based on a division between:

> Services
> Regulation and Inspection
> Developmental activities.

The argument was that each of these activities demanded a different type of organisation. Services should be decentralised. Regulation demanded clear hierarchical control to ensure rule enforcement. Developmental activities required the flexibility of project working. "Municipalities, responsible for ... regulation, service delivery and development should ideally have different types of organisation for doing these tasks". It proposed the grouping of activities into departments on this basis, which could have implications for councillor structure. The distinction between services, regulation and development, is a new way of looking at the activities of the local authority which may create new problems, but at least extends the range of possibilities to be considered with regard to committee structures.

Structures Based on Objectives

An alternative basis proposed for committees is that they should be based on the main objectives of the authority. This means that the committee structure does not necessarily correspond to the departmental structure since departments can contribute to different objectives. This can be seen as a disadvantage if an emphasis is laid upon committees' control over departments. It can however be seen as an advantage if an emphasis is laid on corporate working in support of the council's overall objectives.

At the time of the 1974 reorganisation, programme committees based on the objectives of the council were put forward in the Bains report as an alternative to service committees. The report said that authorities which had adopted such a structure "have divided their work into spheres of activity, each with its own objectives and programme for meeting those objectives. Committees have been made responsible for each programme and for the allocation of resources within it". The issue is raised however whether the committee structure need be the same as the departmental structure or could cut across departments. In practice the programme committees suggested by the Bains Committee tended to group services rather than to cut across the traditional service based structure. It can be useful to base a committee structure on the main objectives of the authority as a way of grouping services, but that probably represents only a limited change.

One variant in grouping committees is to retain the existing structure of service committees, but to build in programme area committees concerned with overall strategy. Thus Barnsley has nine service committees but also has three programme area committees concerned with strategy. These cover:

> the Development Programme Area
> the Education and Leisure Programme Area
> the Health, Home and Care Programme Area.

There is a programme director associated with each programme area. In addition there is a Contract Services Programme Area Committee.

Similarly Leeds has, as well as a Strategic Policy Committee, three group committees, as well as service committees:

- Community services Group
- Development Services Group
- Resources Group.

A Combined Approach

The broad issue raised by all these approaches is whether a new basis is sought for the committee system. Each in different ways challenge existing assumptions. They suggest perspectives that may be neglected in existing structures and raise issues about how these perspectives can gain a place in the working of the authority, even if there is a reluctance to base the main committee structure on such approaches. It is possible to envisage structures which depart from the traditional pattern but combine a number of different approaches.

North Tyneside is an example of an authority that has carried out a radical review of the Committee structure. Under the Policy and Resources committee five standing committees were set up:

> Environment
> Performance Review and Monitoring (working through task groups)
> Education (which deals with all services for children)
> Social Affairs
> External Affairs.

All services for children are in the same committee - a form of client committee. The external affairs committee is concerned with all external agencies and organisations. North Tyneside has also set up five policy liaison committees for Health Issues, Voluntary Organisations, Women, Older People and Young People. The Health Issues Committee is in effect a standing scrutiny committee, while the others are client-based with an important consultation as well as monitoring and developmental roles.

New Types of Committees

One or two examples can be given of committees for particular topics not normally covered in the committee structure. Thus Nottinghamshire has a new Community Services Committee, deliberately not drawn from the council leadership. Its terms of reference are:

> **"Scrutiny of the council's services**
>
> To promote cross service planning and review across the council's committees in order to best meet the needs of each community in Notts.
>
> To undertake a range of formal reviews of community needs and council provision to meet those needs, including the establishment of Ad Hoc Panels to look at particular issues.
>
> To make recommendations to other committees of the council on the future direction of services for particular communities.

Scrutiny of public services beyond the council

To provide a forum in which Members can scrutinise the range and effectiveness of public services.

Democracy and consultation

To foster greater local democracy through:

> sponsoring of innovative ways of consulting the public

> building of partnerships with the public, private and voluntary sector bodies to serve and be accountable to the Nottinghamshire public.

Access to and marketing of County Council services

To encourage access to Council services through improving the marketing and promotion of services to each community.

Other matters of cross service 'community interest'

Community safety."

In the new unitary authorities there are other examples of innovation. Cardiganshire has a Welsh Language and Culture Committee. Torfaen has an External Affairs Committee. Fife also has an External Relations Committee focusing on European and international issues, "all of which have become increasingly important, not least as a result of the potential financial benefits to the Council". Fife also proposes to set up a Citizenship Commission which "will be charged with taking forward and developing decentralisation, consultation, and community and citizen involvement". Specifically, it is proposed that it will have the following roles:

a) to work with the area committee structure in developing decentralisation and mechanisms for community participation in decisions and to ensure effective learning between areas within and from outwith Fife;

b) to examine and help initiate new ways of involving citizens in, for example, consumer panels, focus groups, community workshops, etc.;

c) to initiate and support a process of local service and policy reviews at area committee level and with community and consumer involvement;

d) to ensure the development of good consultation practice throughout the Council and its institutions; and

e) to commission appropriate research, surveys and consultative exercises to inform the development of best practice."

The Vale of Glamorgan has set up a Joint Liaison Committee with Town and Community Councils. "This standing Committee will bring together County Borough Councillors and Councillors from each of the Town and Community Councils in the Vale. This Committee will discuss issues of common interest, service delivery and corporate policy. It reports direct to the full council."

Innovation can proceed through new types of committee being created alongside the main committee structure.

Reviewing the Committee System

If it is assumed that the main basis of the committee structure is to remain unchanged, issues can still be raised about the changes that are sought in that structure.

There is first the issue of whether a significant change is required in the number of committees and sub-committees. Related issues are the size of committees and the length of the committee cycle.

The tables below show the number of committees and sub-committees in each type of authority in 1992, taken from the Local Government Management Board's Survey of Organisational Change.

	Metropolitan Districts	London Boroughs	District Councils	County Councils
Committees	11.2	9.2	6.6	8.3
Sub-Committees	32	28.5	12.1	26.9
Length of Cycle (weeks)	5.9	8.8	7	10.8

The arguments put forward for a reduction in the number of committees and sub-committees are to secure a saving in the time spent by councillors on committee work, both to reduce the time burden on councillors and to enable them to develop other roles in the council. A reduction can also be proposed in order to focus councillors' attention on council and committee strategy, on policy-making and/or the review of performance. It will then be associated with increased delegation to officers in the day-to-day management of the authority.

The wider issue is that a council reviewing its structure should consider the reasons for a review of the committee structure and what it aims to achieve. Is the aim:

to change the focus of the committee system as suggested by some of the more radical approaches?

to review the committee structure to ensure better co-ordination of activities?

to introduce new perspectives that are not encompassed by the existing structure?

to reduce the amount of time spent in committee work by streamlining the committee structure?

to establish new ways of working for councillors in committees?

to establish new settings for the development of the representative role?

to establish settings to support other roles of councillors?

Some of these require changes in the committee structure. Others may more readily be achieved by changes in the way in which council and committees work or providing new and additional settings to those provided by the committee system.

CHANGING WAYS OF WORKING

Rather than change structure, more may be achieved by changes in ways of working. **The issue raised is the need to review ways of working as well, or even instead of, structure.**

The Council Meeting

The council meeting follows well-established patterns in most local authorities. It is normally structured around the working of committees, receiving reports or even approving their minutes. Resolutions may be moved, often enough recording the formalities of party political debate.

Yet it is possible to envisage different forms of council meeting if one breaks out of the constraints of past practice. A council meeting can give expression to emerging concerns for the role of the local authority in community government. The council meeting can be in effect a community forum in which wider concerns are heard and expressed.

A council could hold a state of the city (or town or county or district debate) in which the attention of the council focused for the whole meeting on the key issues of the area including, but not limited to, the issues with which the existing activities of the authority were concerned. Such a debate was held by Leicester City Council. Different forms are possible for such a debate. It would be possible to change the format of the council meeting to allow inputs from spokespersons from other agencies and organisations as a

background to the debate. Taunton Deane has proposed to hold "a state of the borough debate" and are looking at the possibility of parish councils and major voluntary organisations contributing to that debate.

The council meeting provides a unique opportunity for the council to speak to community concerns. The London Borough of Bromley has instituted a Council in Committee procedure in which the council focuses on issues of wide concern. The standing orders specify:

"Council in Committee
20. (1) There shall be in the annual programme of meetings two scheduled dates for meetings of the Council in Committee. These dates shall be fixed by the Policy and Resources : Committee. The Policy and Resources Committee shall also be authorised to convene additional meetings of the Council in Committee as considered necessary.

Subject Matter
(2) The subject matter to be discussed at Council in Committee shall be determined by the Policy and Resources Committee. The Policy and Resources Committee shall have complete discretion to determine the subject matter but, as a general rule, Council in Committee should discuss only major corporate matters of significant relevance to at least one of the Council's functions which cut across standing Committee responsibilities or which have a major impact for the Council as a whole."

Kirklees has used the reports of scrutiny panels into similar issues as a focus for council debates.

Many councils will hold seminars for councillors on issues of community concern, what is proposed here goes beyond that. **The issue for councils to consider is whether the unique opportunity provided by the council meeting as a public occasion could be used to focus public interest.**

The Workings of Committees

There is a tendency for committees to follow well-established ways of working, which may no longer be fitted to the changing role of local government. The procedures of committees have often been based on the assumption that they are there to control the day-to-day running of services. That is no longer appropriate when services are provided under contract or when management is devolved to cost centres. Committees still need to control services, but that is achieved through specifying what is required and reviewing whether it is achieved. That requires a different approach to committee work, which may have a wider relevance. **The issue raised is the need for councils to review ways of working which may be more determined by past traditions than by present needs.**

Agenda Review

Because committees have conducted their business on the assumption of direct control, agendas have tended to fill up with items of immediate concern in the running of services. Often these focus more on the production function (i.e. about the organisation of services) rather than on the marketing function (i.e. the needs to be met). There is a case for the councillors on each committee regularly conducting an agenda review to determine whether they have been considering items unnecessarily **and** whether there are items they should have been considering that they have not had the opportunity to do. The committee and its agenda is the main organisational instrument that councillors have for exercising their responsibilities. It is important that they review whether it meets their needs.

Such a review can be assisted by an analysis giving details for the period covered by the review of:

- Number of items for decision; discussion; information

- Number of items dealt with; discussed; formally approved without discussion (to assist consideration of whether they need be on the agenda)

- Classification of items by main subject area (to establish their relationship to the committee's priorities)

- Classification of items by focus (e.g. "production" issues concerned with internal departmental operations versus "marketing" issues concerned with the public)

- Classification of items by reference to policy (e.g. number of items for which there was an established policy and the proposed action lay within that policy; number of items that come because there was not an established policy, but there could have been).

Agenda review is the process by which a committee takes charge of its own working. It should establish a basis for the future working of the committee that both gives members effective control and yet builds a sense of management responsibility. Items should not unnecessarily go to committee weakening managerial responsibility and centralising decisions by drawing items up the hierarchy, but a committee should have the opportunity to consider emerging issues and determine the approach to be adopted - often such items get squeezed out of the agenda by the pressure of immediate business. That may well be a case of the relatively unimportant driving out the important.

A review should cover more than the items on the agenda. It should cover such issues as the form and length of the reports circulated with the agenda, officer involvement in the work of the committee and the time allowed for discussion of items on the agenda. Such a consideration could focus on:

- Are agendas clearly laid out so that the business before the committee can readily be understood?

- Is officer involvement in the work of the committee helpful? How could it be made more helpful?

- Does the committee require too many or too few officers to attend, and should this number be reviewed?

- What is the optimum length of time for committee meetings? What are the implications for the agenda and the cycle of meetings?

Consideration would be helped by an analysis setting out such information as:

- The average length of reports; to enable consideration to be given to whether more or less length is required

- The number of sheets of paper sent out to a councillor per meeting and the number of sheets of paper sent out per annum; to enable consideration of the amount of material the councillor is expected to assimilate

- The average number of officers present at each meeting by department:

    - for the whole of the meeting
    - for part of the meeting;

  to enable consideration as to whether more or less are required.

- The average length of time per meeting; to enable consideration of the use to be made of councillors' time (and of officers' time).

Periodic consideration by committees of their way of working is a prerequisite of effective operation. Performance review is a discipline that can be applied by a committee to its own working, as well as to the services for which it is responsible.

A Differentiated Cycle

A more fundamental change than that implied by agenda review should also be considered. Most committees operate on an "undifferentiated" cycle by which is meant that all meetings deal with current business. In that sense all meetings are the same - and it can often feel like that. The important appears on the agenda with the unimportant. In some authorities the committee's strategy is just another item on the agenda - and not surprisingly it is only perfunctorily discussed.

The alternative is a "differentiated" cycle in which different meetings have their own purpose. Thus it would be possible to reduce the number of routine meetings and replace them by separate meetings to discuss:

- the strategy of the committee
- a quality of service review
- the annual assessment
- specific areas of policy.

These meetings could be given a format that differs from the normal committee, because they have been freed from the formalities of getting through a long agenda. Thus each committee's strategy meeting should be an awayday in which it focuses on key changes in the environment, the main changes required in the activities of the services for which the committee is responsible and key issues that require examination in depth over the coming year, possibly by working groups or by separate meetings of the committee focused on a specific issue.

The annual assessment meeting which would provide a background for the strategy meeting could ask such questions as:

> How successful has the service's performance been?
>
> What aspects of the service have been most successful and which have been least?
>
> Has performance improved?
>
> Does the Committee have adequate information on performance?
>
> What have been the main problems encountered in the service?
>
> What issues have been over-emphasised in the running of the service and which neglected?
>
> What changes are taking place in the environment that should be on the committee's agenda of concern?
>
> What are the main strengths and weaknesses of the organisation of the services?

The quality of service review would ask such questions as:

> Is the authority providing the best possible service within the resources available?
>
> What are the barriers to better quality service?
>
> How can those barriers be overcome and how can the quality of service be improved?

In this way the structure of meetings can be used to distinguish between the purposes of meetings and permits different formats. This can also be achieved by structural change. In Bexley there

> "... are four main "Business" Committees responsible for developing the key social and environmental policies for the services provided by the council and for shaping the future of the Borough. In addition, the Policy and :Resources Committee is responsible for exercising choice between competing demands for resources and for developing the framework needed to ensure that the Council develops as a responsive and efficient organisation."

There are also executive panels which

> "... are responsible for overseeing the implementation of agreed policies and service delivery. They play a key role in the performance review process, developing quality standards and improving value for money. They are also responsible for deciding operational matters not delegated to officers, especially those issues with a high public profile such as traffic management schemes."

But structural changes may not be required if committees change their way of working.

The Impact of Co-option

Additional members can be co-opted to committees from outside the council, although with the exception of the representatives of the churches on Education Committees they cannot be given voting rights because of the changes introduced by the Local Government Act 1988, following the recommendations of the Widdicombe Committee. That however can be an advantage in developing the use of co-option to add to the range of experience or background of the committee, possibly changing through that means the nature of discussion at committees. When co-option carried with it the right to vote, there was a natural tendency for co-option to be influenced by party considerations, since co-option could affect party balance on committees. Once the right to vote is not at stake, different principles can apply.

In Lincolnshire the council created up to 67 co-opted places on committees and invited nominations from over one thousand organisations. They received 267 nominations for 182 individuals and commissioned the Electoral Reform Society to conduct an election amongst those nominating to determine the allocation of the places.

> "By working in partnership in this way, it is hoped to draw wider expertise direct into the heart of local government and the decision-making processes which identify and determine the services that Lincolnshire people receive."

Reports and Papers

Reports should be written to meet the needs of councillors. Length, format and presentation should be designed for effective use by councillors. Many councillors scan the papers for committee, not having the time to read each paper in detail. If that is the reality then papers should assist scanning. This can be achieved in various ways: the précis; short reports with appendices for detailed information: one key phrase can be underlined in each paragraph to aid scanning.

Councillors should regularly review the nature of the reports they receive and officers should be prepared to learn from councillors as to the sort of reporting they want. This can be part of the agenda review. A starting point could be the number of pages the

councillor is sent for each meeting and over a year, as suggested in the agenda review. Good reports can be identified by councillors as models to be followed. Councillors are "customers" of those who write reports, whose views should be known and whose needs should be met.

The Conduct of Meetings

The traditional form of a committee in local government is determined by its accepted task - authoritative decision-making based on a prescribed agenda. That task requires a formal setting. It leads to the layout of the meeting, the rules of procedure, the role of the chair and the formality necessary for the discharge of business. The problem is not that committees take this form for their normal business but that they often take only this form.

Formality assists the discharge of business, although questions can and should regularly be asked by a committee about its conduct of business to ensure that effective use is made both of councillors and officers' time. But the formality of the traditional meeting is not necessarily the best setting for other purposes. Policy discussion is not helped by such formality . One of the opportunities created by a differentiated cycle is to provide for different types of meeting for different purposes. Thus, meetings for discussion need not, and should not, have the same format as meetings for decision. Discussion should lead eventually to decision, and the results of discussion may have to find their authority through a decision based on a formal agenda item in a traditional committee setting, but discussion need not start there.

Even without a differentiated cycle, various forms of meetings are possible:

- the meeting with only one item on the agenda, to enable the issue to be explored in depth

- the committee meeting without a fixed agenda, to allow a stock-taking of issues

- a seminar held away from the normal setting of the council offices to permit wide-ranging discussion

- area committees of various forms often adopt new processes that allow the public to contribute to discussion, widening the views to be considered.

Meetings for discussion as opposed to decision can benefit from:

- a change in the role of the chair that is less concerned with processing business and more with encouraging discussion

- a location that encourages the flow of discussion

- a seating arrangement that does not suggest the traditional committee meeting

- a structuring of the discussion to open up possibilities rather than an agenda to be worked through

- organisational time and space to enable discussion to develop in depth.

The Workings of the Policy and Resources Committee

The changes that are taking place in local government are giving a new importance to the work of the Policy and Resources Committee or to an equivalent committee charged with an overview of the work of the authority. Devolution, the development of CCT and of contracts or quasi-contracts to govern relationships can fragment the work of the authority. While there is a strength in the differentiation of clear tasks, government needs a capacity for integration as well as for differentiation. The need for integration can be met by the Policy and Resources Committee if it develops capacity for strategic guidance and for organisational review. Its task is to ensure the organisation sustains the role of local government and that requires both setting strategic guidelines and ensuring that the increasingly differentiated organisation can achieve those guidelines.

The local authority faces not merely fragmentation within, but fragmentation in the system of community government, through the creation of new agencies. This gives a new emphasis to the role of local authorities in community leadership, that requires an organisational base in the local authority which can probably best be provided by the Policy and Resources Committee.

These tasks do not necessarily require a change of structure, but they do require change in ways of working if they are to be carried out effectively. The ways of working recommended for service committees would provide a pattern for the Policy and Resources Committee. Its own quality of service review and its annual assessment would build on the reviews and assessments carried out by committees.

While the quality of service review and the annual assessment of the Policy and Resources Committee would build on and add to the work of other committees, its strategy review would guide them as it would guide the authority's role in community leadership. A strategy review should focus on key issues rather than pre-determine the authority's activities in detail. There is a merit in the strategy meeting of the Policy and Resources Committee that lasts a day, or even two days, to allow the issues facing the authority and the community to be explored in depth. A two-day meeting could be more effective than a dozen meetings on a regular cycle. Such a meeting could be structured to consider:

- the issues facing local communities
- an assessment of organisational strengths and weaknesses in meeting those issues
- key issues facing departments which have implications for the authority as a whole
- the relationship between the local authority and other agencies in resolving those issues.

In the light of the above the Committee can ensure:

- the identification of key strategic issues and discussion of how they might be resolved
- a discussion of possible main strategic directions and an examination of their implications in practice, leading to strategic guidelines
- a consideration of organisational changes required
- the development of themes to be highlighted for community leadership.

The issue raised is whether the working of the Policy and Resources Committee enables it to give strategic direction to the work of the authority and a basis for community leadership.

Group Working

The role of the councillor as political person has its own settings in the political group. Political groups and the processes within them are critical to decision-making in local authorities. Yet, understandably, in authorities' reviews of internal management, the operation of political groups has been treated as outside the scope of the review. That means an important part of the councillor's work is not considered although the effective workings of the council may depend upon the effective workings of the group and upon the relationship between group activities and the workings of the authority as much or more than it does on the working of the formal committee system.

Any serious consideration of support for the role of councillors must take account of the workings of the groups which would be undertaken by the groups themselves. If the council has decided to review political structures, then each group should consider whether it should review its own way of working. One issue is whether group processes are adequate for setting policy direction, for policy development, and for policy review. Group processes both at the level of council and committee are often based on the authority's own processes, bringing agendas before the group for consideration. The weaknesses of those processes become the weakness of the group processes. It is appropriate that in any review of the working of the authority, the groups should carry out a review of their own workings. It would be ridiculous to change committees' ways of working without considering change in the way of working of political groups.

In the same way that it is suggested that council and committees should adopt new ways of working, so can political groups. Thus some political groups have spent awaydays or weekends discussing key policy issues. One group has experimented with an agendaless meeting. Another group used a weekend seminar to explore alternative futures for the city, with groups of councillors adopting the perspective of one social group - the elderly or the young. Groups can break up the formality of such meetings by breaking down into smaller numbers for discussion, feeding back into the whole group for decision.

In a review of group working questions can be asked:

- Does the format of meetings enable the group to carry out its work effectively?
- Do group agendas bring the key issues before them?
- Do the groups have adequate information before them when making decisions?
- Do group processes enable effective decision-making to take place?

Such a review should cover the role of group discipline. Whips can too readily be imposed on issues where no party issue is involved, but where all that is at stake is the endorsement of an officer recommendation. The councillor is a political person and will always bring political judgement to bear on issues - that does not, however, require group discipline on every item. Policy decisions and budgetary decisions can justify group discipline, but not all items are of such weight. The issue of when and how group discipline should be imposed merits consideration. Not all issues require the equivalent of a three line whip.

If the council is reviewing is structure and processes for councillors then the issue is what such a review means for group structures and processes.

ADDITIONAL SETTINGS

The committee system provides the main organisational setting for the work of the council. It need not be the only setting - it can be complemented by other settings in which issues can be explored which do not fit into committees' responsibilities or for which the committee setting is not suitable.

There are issues which cut across the committee structure as there are issues related to the external role of the council in community leadership, which do not fit into existing structures. The wicked issues do not fit easily into committee structures - that is one reason for calling them wicked. The representative role of the councillor cuts across committees and is not restricted to the committees on which he or she sits.

The format of committee has a necessary formality. It works through the agenda and is subject to the rules for conducting business enforced by the chair. A good chair is "someone who gets through the business". It is a setting for formal decisions and not for the flow of discussion involved in exploring a policy issue, or for the in-depth scrutiny required for performance review.

If the main committee structure is maintained on the present or a modified basis, the issue arises as to whether additional settings are required and where such settings already exist, whether they are adequately used and what changes are required.

Working Parties and Panels

Many authorities have developed workshops, working parties or panels to explore policy issues in depth. These can be joint officer-members working parties or can be member working parties serviced by councillors.

In Arun

"... Councillors were invited to take part in four workshop groups, on People, Jobs, Homes and Environment. The task of each study group was to identify the issues, views, questions for the future and choices for the role of the Council, especially the strengths and weaknesses of the present decision-making process to tackle future challenges. This work was all carried out prior to the elections in May 1995. Councillors' views were added to those of Town and Parish Councils, local organisations, members of the public, Council tenants, and officers of the Council, with the aim of providing the in-coming Council with the best possible background information on which to base future priorities and thinking."

In Bexley there are

"... four joint Advisory Committees established to help develop comprehensive and consistent policies for clients or issues where the Business Committees have shared interests. These, together with other Advisory Panels, are intended to enable Members to increase their contribution to policy development and to benefit from outside bodies with specialist knowledge, either by consultation or co-option."

Coventry has established policy teams as part of its structure based around a series of co-ordinating committees structured around the making of policy:

Resources and Social Justice (replacing the Policy and Resources Committee)
Development and Economy
Housing and Environment
Social Care and Health
Education and Training
Community and Leisure
and a Coventry Contract Services Board.

The role of the co-ordinating committees is to **co-ordinate** policy within broadly defined areas of policy.

The structure is supported by a series of policy teams responsible for developing policy. These policy teams are established on a continuing basis and there was a danger that so many can be created so that they monopolise too much of the time of officers and councillors. Coventry has recently revised the structure to reduce the number of such policy teams. Policy teams can operate in different ways:

- "Have a designated lead member
- Take responsibility for a key political priority
- Develop, promote and champion policy inside and outside the City Council
- Have delegated responsibility to act as a sub-committee where appropriate
- Operate as a review group with the opposition
- Vary in size and responsibility."

In effect they have a policy mode, an executive mode and a review mode and can operate in different ways for different modes.

The danger of constituting a set of policy teams on an on-going basis is that they can become like a series of sub-committees and even be tempted to behave like them, structuring themselves around a continuing agenda. The alternative is to create ad hoc working groups or panels that meet for a period of time and then disband after considering a particular policy area.

Reading

"... has, over the past eight years, developed a number of non-executive Forums, Panels and Working Groups to support joint Councillor-Officer Working; to encourage consultation with interested outside organisations; and more generally to encourage participation in the decision-making (but not decision-taking) process.

These Panels and Working Groups have tended to develop their own practices and conventions over time. they have not been the subject of :Council Standing Orders and have been allowed to evolve. Some have proved extremely effective in generating consultation and debate with a wider audience; others have been less successful and some have been discontinued on review."

Member-officer groups can have a role. They played an important part in organisational change in the Central Region of Scotland as described in *Change in Central*, published in 1995. There were Member-Officer Review Groups including transportation, pre-fives and Youth and Standing Groups including Social Strategy and Europe.

"Member officer groups involved the Council in a new style of working. Openness of debate between members and officers was of critical importance to the quality of recommendations produced, and trust developed that would not normally have happened. As a result of the freer flows of information and of the exposure of differing points of view, the groups not only developed recommendations close to the manifesto commitments of the Labour Group, but also had the technical and professional input to make them viable. In the past, manifesto commitments often bore little relation to the policy developed by officers for the Council. However, logic suggests that a policy has more prospect of being delivered if both officers and members have ownership of that policy."

Nottinghamshire Community Services Committee described above has established

> "... Ad-Hoc member panels for the three 'wide areas' of the county - the conurbation, the coalfield, the rural areas. Each panel has 12 members from all parties drawn from, where possible, the appropriate 'wide area'. Their remit is to scrutinise a number of cross-service reviews which are taking place. Not only do the panels include elected members, they also feature officers from the relevant departments and representatives of the voluntary sector."

The need to review the operations of panels of all types is important. In some authorities such working parties or panels have proliferated and have continued beyond their useful life. A number of conditions should be set:

- panels and working groups should be set up with a clear purpose
- the output expected from their work should be specified
- it should be clear how the product of their work will be processed through the authority
- it should be clear which committee or committees they report to
- panels and working groups should have a period fixed for the completion of their work
- they should have agreed stages for their work which set an overall structure for their meetings
- the overall number and patterns of such panels and groups should be periodically reviewed.

Cambridgeshire County Council introduced a Select Panel System. These Select Panels operate with a specific time-span defined by the Policy Committee. At any time there can be no more than seven ad hoc panels, although usually there have only been three at any one moment of time.

The subject of the panels are nominated by the various party groups in proportion to their strength and they supply the chair. Select panels can have chairs from any party. They report to the Policy committee and their reports are available to all councillors. Topics considered recently have included economic development; people at risk; road safety; deprivation and disadvantage.

A performance review panel can be set up to review performance in a particular activity or topic area. It can conduct its business in a different way from the working groups and panels already discussed.

Kirklees has distinguished three forms of review:

"The Council has recognised that a key role for members is to review the Council's delivery of Services. It has been recognised that this is not a job for a small central group of Members but one which should be widely shared across all Service Committees. The Agenda for each Service Committee has a section devoted to Review initiatives. These relate to Policy, Quality and performance Review, which are seen as slightly distinct from each other:

- **Policy Review** is an occasional in depth look at a selected aspect of a Service asking whether it is achieving Members' aims or whether it is time for a fresh approach

- **Quality Review** aims to provide feedback on the service from the standpoint of the Service users' actual experience - how does it feel to use this service?

- **Performance Review** keeps the whole activity of a Service under constant review by regularly reporting to Members some objective information about what the Service is doing - i.e. "performance indicators"."

Quality review involves councillors in service sampling:

"Sometimes this involves a visit by a group of Elected Members to a particular facility and in other cases might involve a structured meeting with a group of service users.

The aim is to provide Elected Members with the opportunity of understanding more clearly how each Service "feels", both to their users and to the staff who provide them. The Review activities are all carefully planned and handled in a sensitive way."

Panels and working parties can fulfil different purposes and take different forms. The council should see their design and use as important, relating form to purpose. The issue is how to realise the potential of this way of working, which requires a readiness to use such approaches, but with careful planning of how they are used.

Management Boards

Many local authorities have recognised that councillors' responsibilities for direct services organisations have to be exercised in a different way from the normal committee. It has become common therefore to describe the bodies set up to control of DSOs as management boards. This symbolises a different approach. Thus the title of Brent Council Business Board was chosen to mark that difference:

"The Board took from the present Contract Services Committee but with a wider remit. the Committee will be served by the Brent Council Business Advisory Board. These titles have been chosen following soundings of business unit managers and others ...

... The role of this Officer Advisory Board will be to report to the Member Board on the developing new business environment within Brent, on the operational management and financial performance of free-standing businesses within the Council, on the performance of the Support Unit (including training programmes and monitoring arrangements and Support Services) and business discussions on the proposed use of surpluses and the implications of deficits for negotiation with the Corporate Core and ultimately the Policy and Resources committee."

Such management boards tend to be smaller, capable of taking decisions more quickly and allowing a greater involvement of officers than the traditional committee. There may well be other commercial or semi-commercial activities for which such an approach should be considered.

Settings for the Representative Role

Committee structures based on areas have already been discussed. However, even when such a radical change is rejected, it is still possible to build up area committees alongside the main committee structure.

The role of the councillor as representative for their area has been given direct support in some authorities by creating area committees of councillors for a ward or group of wards alongside the main committee structure. Such committees meet in the area, and will often provide opportunities for contributions from the public. They can review the services in the area, hearing from the officers concerned. Proposals being considered by the main council committees can be referred to area committees for comment. Area committees will discuss and ask for comments on issues of public concern, including some which may have been raised by the public at the meeting.

Even where such area committees have no decision-making power or only limited powers, they can play a role in providing a setting for councillors to discuss issues that arise from their representative role. The area committee provides the means of ensuring such issues get on the agenda of the appropriate committees and that their conclusions are reported back.

Birmingham has set up area committees which meet monthly, sometimes on a constituency (three or four wards) and sometimes on a ward basis. They consist of the councillors for the areas concerned and the MP is entitled to attend. They provide a forum for issues of local concern, with arrangements for input from local people.

Sheffield is planning Area Monitoring Groups

"... initially involving six pilot projects in various areas of the City. Each of these Groups comprises seven Council members and has the services of a full time officer with specific responsibility to support the Group in its work to monitor the delivery of Council services in that particular area."

An alternative to the creation of area committees composed of councillors is the development of neighbourhood forums or community councils, where representatives of the local community and the public generally can discuss the nature of the service and highlight local issues. Properly developed this can support the representative role of the councillors.

Middlesbrough developed a series of community councils which were open to all members of the public, but also representatives of community groups and in some cases elected residents. Councillors attended the meetings which considered council activities. Islington developed neighbourhood forums alongside neighbourhood offices as a recognised part of the council's working. There are two ways of constituting the forums' formal membership, by election and by nomination from local groups. Councillors can attend but do not vote. Arun has developed three area forums called Area Liaison Panels. Each parish council has a representative on the appropriate Panel which report to the Policy and Resources Committee.

In Bradford both area panels of councillors and neighbourhood forums have been created. They are linked together. Alongside each area panel, a number of neighbourhood forums have been set up which can be attended by councillors. Their views are naturally influential on the area panels.

Settings are being developed that link together county, district and town or parish councils and build upon councillors' representative role. It can be a development of the role of local authorities in community government. In Hertfordshire community government projects bring together county, district and town council representatives in meetings to discuss local issues and to determine local priorities. In Somerset the county and district councils are pursuing a variety of ways of linking county, district and town or parish councils - the actual approach being adopted varying from district to district.

In some counties the need has been recognised to ensure that county councillors are informed on the work of all services in their area. Briefing meetings have been held in Surrey to give the county councillors background for joint working with district councillors.

In Cheshire, the authority is

> "... developing a series of Area or District Briefings for our Members on a Service basis to try to ensure that they are completely 'au fait' with developments either in their patch or rather more broadly. This also gives the Member the chance to question and discuss with Specialist Officers in a slightly more relaxed atmosphere."

In a wide variety of ways councils are providing settings in which the representative role of the councillor for an area is recognised, is enhanced and is expressed. The success of this development requires however that the organisation of the council is capable of responding to the development of the representative role. This will require changes in the working of service or other committees to respond to the views expressed and issues raised. Unless this is done the development of the representative role will cause frustration rather than action.

The issue is how the role of the councillor as the elected representative for an area should be supported and how the council's organisation should respond to such developments.

The Settings to Support Community Governance

In an increasing number of authorities local authorities see their role in community government as concerned with the needs and problems of their area beyond the services provided. Local authorities may not be able to take decisions on all such issues but can influence the wide range of other bodies concerned. The problem is to find structure and processes that support that wider role. It has already been suggested that the council meeting provides an opportunity to focus on issues of community concern. A state of the city debate or its equivalent in other authorities could play a part in setting out directions for the authority, which could be supported by the work of the Policy and Resources Committee. The work of community leadership is however unlikely to fit into traditional committee structures.

Broadly that work will involve both scrutiny and partnership. As concern has grown about the accountability of public bodies a number of local authorities have emphasised their role in monitoring such bodies, yet local authorities also have to, and wish to, work with other agencies and organisations. One way is to focus on issues.

Sheffield has set up Policy Service Commissions:

> "'Public Service Commissions' comprising a small number of elected members across the political parties the first of which has now began to consider matters relating to the provision of water services. The Group will hear evidence from interested parties and present a report on its findings in due course."

Bromley has agreed to set up a Public Services Forum:

"The subject matter will be determined by the Council's Policy & Resources Committee in accordance with the Council's Standing Orders. The intention is that the subject matter will be chosen on the basis that it is a matter of significant concern to Bromley residents and is such that it transcends the responsibilities of at least two Public Agencies (including Agencies which, whilst not legally themselves public, provide a public service), one of which must be the Council.

The Agency or Agencies affected by a proposed subject will be consulted on the proposed terms of reference before it is chosen for consideration by the Forum.

The Forum will generally met in public but, in appropriate circumstances, will be prepared to have private sessions within the requirements of the Local Government Acts relating to access to information.

The Forum will invite written and/or oral representations from those Agencies affected by any subject matter under consideration. These representations will normally be given in public but, in appropriate circumstances, would be given in private, within the requirements of the Local government Acts relating to access to information.

The Forum will also, in appropriate cases and at its discretion, invite oral and/or written representations from other persons and organisations. It will also have the ability to initiate research as it thinks necessary."

Stevenage District council has set up a Local Monitoring Sub-Committee whose terms of reference cover monitoring "the policies of unelected public sector bodies and the services they provide, considering the implications of their policies for the Stevenage community, canvassing the opinions of the community on the services and policies, providing information to the community about the work of these bodies and responding to their consultations on policy developments". This work goes alongside an established pattern of partnership working with these bodies. In that way partnership and scrutiny can work together.

Kirklees has instituted Scrutiny Panels to explore issues of public concern, which often involve outside bodies. They take evidence and prepare reports which are considered by the full council and receive significant attention from council and public. Kirklees has described the process:

"Kirklees believes that the Council is Local government - not just a service providing agency. As such it has a remit and a responsibility to investigate any issue which has an impact on the public of Kirklees and to lead public debate. As a consequence of this the Council has established a system of Scrutiny Commissions to examine major issues. Their investigations cover issues for which other organisations are primarily responsible and major issues within the Council, but not within the remit of any one Service Committee. six Commissions are held each year.

In 1994/95 the topics considered by Scrutiny Commissions were:

(i)   Local Government Act 1966: Section 11 Funding
(ii) Affordable Housing
(iii) Issues Surrounding Disability
(iv) roads and Street Works Act
(v)   Further Education and Further Education Colleges
(vi) Contracting and Sub-Contracting ...

... The Commissions have the ability to call witnesses or request reports from Officers of Kirklees Council or other organisations, as appropriate to the matter under investigation. Officers of Kirklees Council are expected to attend as requested. It is recognised that employees of other organisations will attend on a voluntary basis ...

... The intention is that the experience of Scrutiny Commission will not of necessity be confrontational. The intention is also to develop relationships with external organisations and establish what the Council can achieve as a "Change Agent" ...

... The Commissions meet in public except when considering any information of a confidential nature but give detailed consideration to their findings in private session.

After consultation with any relevant Service Committees, their reports are placed before full Council for consideration. Minority reports are not permitted: where disagreement exists this is noted within the report and differences of opinion highlighted."

In all these instances the authorities are also pursuing partnerships with these outside bodies. Scrutiny is not seen as necessarily undermining such partnerships. Indeed many such bodies, concerned about their own lack of clear local accountability, see such scrutiny as supporting partnership, if conducted not with hostility but on a basis of understanding.

Partnerships raise their own issues about the role of councillors. They can take many forms. The Leeds Initiative brings together different organisations concerned with the city, with the Leader as chair. In Birmingham the National Exhibition Centre Ltd is a partnership on which councillors sit with representatives of the Chamber of Commerce. City Challenge has created boards on which councillors sit with community representatives and representatives of commerce and industry. Councillors are working in different settings raising issues of how their work in such settings relates to and feeds back into the main work of the council, issues also raised by joint boards and joint committees with other local authorities.

As local authorities develop their role in community governance, the issue is raised of how the roles of leadership, of scrutiny and of partnership are supported by and related to the work of the council.

Community governance requires a wide ranging concern, but also a readiness to listen to the communities within. Councils have recognised the need to create community forums as settings in which the voices of different communities can be heard. Arun has described its development as the forum approach and has set up a series of forums which recognise both communities of place and communities of interest. As the development of forums are designed to facilitate communication between councils and the differing communities in their area, the role of councillors is important. The councillor as elected representative for an area links most readily to communities of place. A focus on communities of place needs to be balanced by communities of interest and councils have, as an element in their approach to community governance, created forums on key themes such as the environment, or for particular groups such as the elderly or the young or for ethnic minorities. Such forums can make representations to the council or can be a meeting place between the council and representatives of particular groups.

Thus in Dudley there are two models:

There are forums (or fora) dealing with Heritage issues and Tourism. This is where Local Authority Members of both sides meet with a wide range of interested bodies. These meet about once every quarter, are serviced by council Officers and are arenas for debate and consultation on key or sensitive issues within the Policy topic.

Another example is Local Agenda 21, a quarterly forum-type meeting where interested parties are invited to attend (in public) for a debate on specific issues. There is a schedule of meetings with topics identified, but sufficient place on the Agenda of each forum to take on board topics being suggested by participating bodies. There is also facility for a participating body to make a presentation on an issue.

These are examples of Members playing a role in the community but on a semi-structured basis. Such examples could be found in many authorities. In Essex there is development linking forums to the council structure. A series of forums is proposed, each linked to one of a number of council boards focusing on "emerging and acknowledged challenges within the community" such as "the challenge of environment issues, the explosion of information management and the health of the nation". The Boards will be set up alongside a reorganised committee system. One key point about the Board is that it does not deal with single service issues, so they will be advised by a team of chief officers and other senior staff.

Each forums are linked to a council board. Such a forum will be made up of all the key relevant Essex players in that particular area. The County Council would be one such player but only one and would not seek to be dominant in that forum although it would obviously be a player of influence. The Boards would take particular note of the views of a Forum thereby recognising and acknowledging the standing and legitimacy of the Forum's views within the wider community.

In this way a clear link is established between the forums and the council's own organisation.

In working with community forums councillors are developing new ways of expressing their role in community governance. As councils work with community forums, the issue is raised how this development relates to and supports the roles of the councillor.

STRENGTHENING LOCAL DEMOCRACY

In *Innovation in Democratic Practice* (1995) and in *Further Innovation in Democratic Practice* (1996), both published by INLOGOV, I have argued that the future of local government requires as much innovation in democratic practice as it has had in management practice. A vibrant local democracy is a condition of effective community governance ensuring closeness to communities. In those papers a variety of approaches are considered to enhancing democracy and building up a habit of citizenship. They include:

Citizens' juries and deliberative opinion polls to seek out the considered and informed views of citizens.

Community forums to explore the views both of communities of place and communities of interest.

New forms of public meeting to maximise public interest and involvement.

Mediation groups to bring together differing interests in discussion rather than in conflict.

Teledemocracy or the use of new technology to enhance democratic processes.

Appraisal and monitoring processes that involve citizens.

The use of consultative referenda to guide the council.

What is suggested is not any particular approach but rather the recognition that there are a variety of methods available for enhancing citizen participation, which can be used when appropriate. The development of participatory democracy should not be seen as weakening representative democracy but as strengthening it. As is said in *Innovation in Democratic Practice*:

"The more citizens participate the stronger is the elected representative because he or she is then better informed by the views of those represented.

To argue for citizen participation is not to reduce the elected representative to a delegate. Citizens do not speak with one voice. They have different interests and hold different values. The elected representatives have to balance those different

interests and values. Citizens will often speak of problems more readily than solutions, and the elected representative has to find the solution. In the end the councillor has to bring political judgement to bear on the representations made. It will be a better judgement if informed by citizens' views in all their diversity. Direct democracy can replace representative democracy but is limited in practical application, but participatory democracy, far from replacing it, can strengthen it."

What is important is that the councillors are involved in the development of democratic practice. It should be undertaken for, with and by councillors and should feed into council processes, giving councillors new sources of information, adding to their contacts with the public in their representative role. It should be councillors who decide on the use of particular approaches and who consider the results. In this way these approaches strengthen the representative role of the councillor. For example improving the effectiveness of public meetings in stimulating discussion should inform that representative role.

The issue for councils is how to strengthen local democracy so that it enhances the councillor's role as an elected representative.

INDIVIDUAL ROLES

The dominance of the committee system in the working of local authorities has meant that all formal councillor roles in local authorities have normally been derived from committees. A councillor gains organisational identity as chair of a committee. A chair can come to exercise considerable authority outside committee meetings but that authority derives from the role in relation to the committee.

It has almost been that in order to give a role to a councillor one has had to create a committee or sub-committee for them to be chair (or vice-chair). Other roles can be created through committees. North Tyneside has created the additional position of convenor to maintain an interest on all committees on issues of wider policy concern. Thus the convenors have been given a concern for anti-poverty and equal opportunities issues. They meet together as a convenors' group and also join the Chair and Deputy Chair for briefings. In this way it is intended that anti-poverty and equal opportunities issues are given attention in the working of all committees.

The dominance of committee working has established norms which restrict the development of individual roles for councillors - certainly roles outside the committee system. Some developments are restricted by legal rulings preventing delegation of decision-making to individual councillors. That, however, need not restrict the development of advisory or investigative roles for individual councillors, as has happened in some authorities.

The changes that are taking place in local government are opening up the possibility of new individual roles:

- the association of individuals with DSO's or other trading units to ensure they have a councillor sounding board
- the association of individuals with particular local authority establishments in their areas
- the association of individuals with newly developing arms-length organisations or partnerships to ensure a link with the local authority
- the association of individuals with outside organisations on which they may well be representing the council
- the association of individual councillors with new forms of community involvement, giving backing for the representative role
- the identification of individual councillors with issues to be explored either in the community at large or in the workings of the authority.

Emerging patterns suggest new roles. There is a wide range of possible roles for individual councillors apart from membership of committees. Individual councillors can be given responsibility to work with officers on problems or issues, or in support of particular activities - it could even be, although realistically unlikely in some authorities, a member of the opposition. **The issue raised is whether consideration should be been given to the development of individual roles for councillors.**

SUPPORTING THE COUNCILLOR

The councillor has many roles. The councillor has a representative role and a political role and they are roles that they bring to a lesser or greater extent to all the work of the council. Councillors have many different organisational roles.

Roles can be and some have to be played in different ways or through different processes. Some roles are more supported than others. Thus chairs and member of committees are normally relatively well supported because committees are the main organisation setting provided by the authority and emphasised in its working.

Compared with committee work, other roles receive little support. Thus it has been pointed out that in many authorities, once representatives are appointed to outside bodies, they receive no support from the council. They receive no briefing from the authority, nor are they required to report back. Braintree District Council has made such arrangements:

In 1990, Braintree District Council reviewed its policy for working with outside organisations. It distinguished between key organisations with which the council wished to develop a firm relationship because they had a strategic role in influencing the future of the district and other organisations which did not have the same strategic importance. With key organisation each committee or panel was asked to review the relationship, learn more about it, identify the objectives of the council in relation to the organisation and work out a strategy for influencing it. Where the council has formal representation on the organisation, arrangements were made for:

- briefing those representatives by officers prior to meetings
- briefing by the representative to relevant committee or panel chairman
- reports to committee or panels (at least twice yearly).

Cheshire has prepared a handbook of guidance for councillors sitting on outside bodies. Arun has introduced new

"... arrangements to provide better support for Councillors who represent the Council on outside bodies and to strengthen feedback from the major outside bodies on which the Council is represented.

That has been done in two ways. Firstly by clearly identifying the lead officer whose task it is to liaise with the elected Member and provide whatever background information or other support is required. secondly, the elected Member is required to make a verbal report to the relevant Committee on meetings of the outside bodies on which he or she serves. It is the responsibility of the identified lead officer to ensure that the Councillor is supported in this reporting role."

The authority should consider the extent to which it supports the different roles of councillors and the general work of the council. Councils undertaking such a review have started with a survey of councils or conducted panel discussions. Thus Swansea carried out a comprehensive review of the "state of health" of the Council. This took the form of a wide-ranging programme of research directed towards collecting the views and opinions of all key partners in the authority - residents, employees, management, trade unions and councillors. They carried out a survey of councillors as part of this exercise, forming a questionnaire on the basis of unstructured interviews with a small representative sample. The questionnaire covered:

Role as councillors
Attitudes towards the City Council
Communication with departments
Committee meetings and reports
Council facilities and remuneration
Council training.

The London Borough of Bromley used consultants to conduct a qualitative research study, providing an insight into the current attitudes and perceptions of "back-bench" councillors towards the support they receive from officers of the council. This was based on in-depth group discussions with two panels of councillors. The research covered:

- Overview of the help given to councillors
- The role of constituency representative
- The role of the decision-maker
- Becoming an enabling authority; the changing role of councillors
- Amount and style of information passed to councillors by officers
- Training and research provision
- Desired changes in the type of support officers give to councillors.

As a result of these and other investigations, authorities have developed different means of support for councillors. These include:

1. Secretarial services including, for example, dictating machines
2. Help with filing arrangements
3. Twenty four hour dial-in arrangements
4. Information technology for councillors
5. Photocopying arrangements
6. Purpose-designed stationery
7. Policy handbooks summarising council policies
8. Members' handbooks designed as survival packs for new councillors
9. New councillors' exhibitions displaying information about council services
10. Mentors for new councillors
11. Information bulletins for councillors on council business
12. Library and information services
13. Research assistance for councillors
14. A briefing room setting out up-to-date information
15. A review of working conditions for councillors
16. Creche facilities or other arrangements for child care
17. An advisory panel of outside experts for particular committees or on particular issues
18. A members services office, providing assistance for councillors
19. Ward profiles summarising data about the ward
20. Information for ward councillors on local developments as they come before the council
21. A political adviser for each group
22. Codes of practice for officers on report writing for councillors.

The area of information technology for councillors is of growing importance. A number of pilot projects are being developed. Councillors are offered access to E-mail facilities. Council information can be made available through terminals. Councils are using new technology for decision-conferencing to explore budgetary choices.

There is a natural reluctance by councillors to recommend improvement in support services because of the financial costs involved, opening them up to criticism by the public and the press. Yet a failure to give adequate support to councillors is in effect a denial of the importance of councillors' roles. **Each council should consider the adequacy of support services to enable councillors' effective performance of their roles.**

A PROCESS OF DISCUSSION AND A PROCESS OF DECISION

The political structures and processes in any council are the instruments for councillors to use in carrying out their roles. The form they take may however be more a reflection of past practice rather than the needs of the present. They do not have to be accepted merely because they have been accepted in the past. There is a choice. Local authorities in their political structures and processes are more constrained by the constraint of past practice than by statutory requirements. There is a need for councillors periodically to review the structures and processes through which they work. If these are the instruments they use to play their role, they must be satisfied they are the best instruments.

Such a review is best conducted by councillors themselves, possibly using a working party or working parties to explore issues in depth. Indeed it is useful if the way discussion begins breaks out of the traditional committee process showing the potential of new ways of working. The starting point could well be initiated at a seminar to consider the issues raised in the first part of this paper which are designed to assist a process of review:

How are the changes in society and in legislation altering the role of local authorities and of councillors?

What should the role of local authorities be in the light of those changes?

What problems can be identified in the council structure and processes at member level, taking account of the changes that have taken place and of the developing role?

On such a basis a design brief can be based. Discussion can then focus on the design. The elements to be used in that design can include:

The committee structure:
- the need for a committee structure based on executive committees and the alternatives
- the basis of the committee structure
- the possibility of new types of committee
- the size, number and frequency of committees and sub-committees.

Ways of working:
- the form of council meetings
- committee working including:
    agenda review
    a differentiated cycle
    the use of co-option
    the nature of report
    the conduct of meetings
- the working of the Policy and Resources Committee
- the workings of political groups.

Additional settings and organisational roles:
- the role and different forms of working parties and panels
- management boards
- settings for the representative role
- settings to support the local authority's role in community government
- individual roles outside the committee system
- innovations in democratic practice can support the councillor's role.

These elements should be considered in relation to the design brief. Change in structure and processes are not justified for their own sake, but the better to enable both council and councillors to fulfil their roles.

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